

# **The Subaltern's Dilemma in *Things Fall Apart* and *Untouchable Spring*: A Comparative Literary Analysis**

---

**T. Mathivanan M.A., B.Ed.,**  
Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Palayamkottai

---

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the complex dilemmas faced by subaltern groups in colonized societies, emphasizing their dual colonization—first by native upper classes and then by foreign colonizers. Often, subalterns perceive foreign rule as less oppressive compared to the entrenched hierarchies of their native societies, which significantly influences their decisions, including religious conversions from indigenous faiths to those of the colonizers. The paper also examines, the historiographical bias, which excludes the subalterns' culture from representation of national culture. This study examines these dynamics through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring*, offering a comparative analysis that underscores how colonial and native systems of domination shape subaltern identities and choices.

**Keywords:** Historiographical bias, religious conversion, subalterns' dilemma,

The term “subaltern” in literary theory originates from the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who used it to refer to marginalized and oppressed social groups excluded from power structures. In postcolonial studies, the concept gained prominence through the Subaltern Studies Group, particularly the work of theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The subaltern refers to those whose voices and perspectives are systematically excluded or silenced within dominant discourses, often due to factors like class, race, gender, or colonial oppression.

In this research paper the researcher uses the term Subalterns' Dilemma to express the confusion of the subaltern people to choose between the religion of the indigenous or the religion of the colonizers. The latter is less oppressive than the former for them. Though they are the native people of the colonised land they are ostracized by the dominant group of the native people and treated less than a human being, which makes them to lean towards the foreign religion which gives them new

identity and removes rigid social restrictions laid on them for centuries. Their dilemma to choose between the rigid native religion and the less oppressive foreign religion is the direct cause for the conversion of subaltern people to the foreign religion. The Osu of Ibo society and the Malas and Madigas of the Indian Telugu society uses Christianity to negotiate power and create a hybrid identity to challenge the native domination. Homi. K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* states “Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects” (Signs, 154).

This research paper analyses the subaltern people from the novels *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The Untouchable Spring* by Kalyana Rao. The Osu of the Igbo society and the Malas and Madigas of the Telugu Society are the subject of the research. Two of the above mentioned groups are the subaltern people of their society. Though these two groups of people live in different continent thousands of miles away from each other they were treated by their native oppressors in a same way which give the research a universal tone. There were many similarities between these two subalterns. Both of them were discriminated by the majority dominant class and treated less than a human.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* discusses the complexities of Igbo society and culture, with particular attention to social hierarchies and the marginalized groups within this traditional system. Among the suppressed groups are the Osu, the outcasts, who represent a deeply ingrained system of discrimination. The Osu are considered untouchable and cursed, relegated to a life of exclusion from mainstream social, religious, and cultural life. They live apart from the freeborn, prohibited from marrying into non-Osu families or participating in significant communal activities. This systemic oppression reflects not only the rigid stratification of Igbo society but also the ways in which such practices serve to maintain social order. The Osu's position is not merely symbolic; it reveals the cost of maintaining cultural purity and tradition. Their physical and spiritual isolation underscores the community's broader fear of defilement, both moral and religious. The Osu are a poignant representation of those who live on the fringes, unable to break free from the cycle of prejudice that defines their existence.

The Osu of the Igbo Society is restricted by the Dominant class in various ways that exclude them from the society. They are treated as a slave and not allowed to mingle with the other people which is considered as a grave sin. The dominant class man of the Igbo society describes an Osu as:

He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart--a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a

special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste--long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. (Achebe, 66)

The Osu, outcast people are treated like this for centuries they are denied of treated like a fellow human being by the majority dominant class and. Preserving this hierarchy is the core aim of their religious and social codes. According to the United Nations definition, 'discrimination includes any conduct based on a distinction made on grounds of natural or social categories, which have no relation either to individual capacities or merits, or to the concrete behavior of the individual person.' The discriminatory Osu practices involves inequality in freedom of movement and choice of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the enjoyment of the right to marry and establish a family, (and) inequality in access to public office... slavery' (Allport, 52).

*Untouchable Spring* by Kalyana Rao is a poignant exploration of caste-based oppression and resilience, focusing on the lives and struggles of the Mala and Madiga communities in India. Set against the backdrop of centuries-old social hierarchies, the novel sheds light on the systemic discrimination, dehumanization, and exploitation endured by these Dalit castes. The Mala and Madiga people are relegated to the lowest rungs of society; their identities shaped by untouchability, poverty, and forced labour. Yet, despite the relentless suppression, the novel captures their indomitable spirit, collective resistance, and cultural richness, expressed through oral traditions, songs, and folklore. Rao's narrative intertwines personal and communal histories, portraying the Mala and Madiga not just as victims of caste oppression but as agents of change who challenge the deeply entrenched inequalities of the caste system. By delving into their struggles and resilience, *Untouchable Spring* becomes a powerful testament to the enduring fight for dignity, justice, and equality.

The Malas and Madigas who lived thousands of miles away from the Osu people also experienced similar treatment by this dominant upper caste people of Telugu Society. These two caste are seen as outcastes which don't come under the four castes of Varnashramam they are considered as Untouchables. Their touch can pollute the upper caste. These Lower castes have to work as bonded labours in the field of upper caste people without wage. They are not allowed to have their own land, not allowed to cross the Ooru where the upper caste people live and even not

allowed to face them while crossing them and have to clear and eat the carcass of the dead cow. They are not allowed to enter into the temple and fetch water from the common well or lake. When they defy any of the restriction they are severely punished and sometimes brutally beaten and even killed.

The Osu of the Igbo society in Nigeria and the Malas and the Madigas of the Telugu Society in India are the subalterns. Both novels set during the colonial period and the hardship they faced during the colonial period. They were even ruled by the same colonizers, the British empire. They have been discriminated and tortured for many centuries but they did not have a choice in those times but during the colonial period they had choice to choose between. The choice is between the native religion which has suppressed them for centuries and the foreign religion which can free them from their brutal restriction. This Dilemma or the tension is the cause for the drastic conversion of outcast people to the colonizers religion.

The religion of the colonizers offer them the two aspects which their native religions fails to offer that is freedom and equality which made them to embrace the religion of the colonizer. This can be witnessed in difference of treatment by the Missionary people and the native people. The missionary allowed them to get into the church and sit equally along with all the people which they have never experienced for centuries. In the novel *Thing Fall Apart* when the dominant majority protested against two Osu men to enter the church, the missionary pastor Mr. Kiaga encouraged them to enter the church and said “Before God,” he said, “there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers” (Achebe, 112). This made the belief of the outcast people strong. The breaking of the superstitious belief of the native religion also led the outcast people to convert into the colonizers religion in large numbers. The Osu people are not allowed to cut their hair and the belief is that if they cut their hair they will die. This belief is broken when Mr. Kiaga the missionary pastor made the Osu man to shave his head and let him into the church which led to the mass conversion of the locals.

In Kalyana Rao’s *Untouchable Spring* the first convert in the family of Yellanna is his son Sivaiah whose family has been the victim of the cast discrimination for centuries. When Sivaiah and his wife Sasirekha migrated from their village due to great famine, they were brutally chased away by the manager of the canal work because of their Mala identity “He not only had the company of hunger but also untouchability with him. Even those coolies who threw stones at him had walked miles for livelihood. Just ordinary coolies. But hunger too had untouchability. Labour too had untouchability” (Rao, 67) When they were at the edge of the life and about to die under a tree they were saved by Martin another untouchable convert. Sivaiah is in the crossroads to choose between the native

culture which refused him at his last breath in the name of untouchability or the colonizers religion which offers him equality. And he chose the colonizers religion.

Martin whose original name was Chinnodu, a Madiga whose conversion story also gives proof for their dilemma. For not greeting the younger Kappu, an upper class landlord. Chinnodu was beaten black and blue for that crime. He was saved by a White man and this act of humanity by the white man converted him to the white man's religion. The white man broke the superstitious belief like Mr. Kiaga in the *Things Fall Apart*.

The White man held his hand. He touched his hand. He placed his hand on his shoulder... A Brahmin had not touched him. For him his body was untouchable. A Reddy had not touched him for him too the same. Untouchable. If touched, it was so low that it could pollute." (Rao, 159)

So the mere touch becomes an important element for his conversion. Chinnodu's conversion leads to the mass conversion of untouchable people into the foreign religion like that of the Osu man who entered into the Church with shaven head.

Apart from the social discrimination the native dominant group also silences the voices of the untouchable people from the historiographies. The culture, art and music of the untouchable people are neglected from the history. The dominant group carefully ignored the culture of the untouchables in the written representation of the Indian cultures. They placed the art and culture of the upper caste people into the lights and put the folk arts and music of the lower caste people into the shades. This cultural amnesia by the dominant class is captured by Kalyana Rao in his novel *Untouchable Spring*. Art like Bharatanatyam is proposed to represent Indian culture whereas the Indigenous arts like Urumula Nrityam and Veedhi Bagotam are carefully left behind by the native elites. Sometimes the native elites go to the extreme to forcefully erase the culture of the subaltern to be preserved. In the novel *Untouchable Spring* the character Potter Pedakotteshwarudu writes the songs of Yellanna to preserve it but the Brahmins burnt it:

They saw the upper caste chasing him. They saw sticks, crowbars, spades and axes in their hands. They saw the Brahmin running ahead of everyone. They saw their friend fall to the ground right in front of their eyes. They saw the crowbar that had pierced his back and the stick that attacked his head. They saw the written pages flung by the Brahmin burning in the corner. (Rao, 105)

In this act one can witness that the Brahmins are very much focused on burning the written document of the Pedakotteshwarudu which preserve the art of

subaltern people. This act of them shows how their cunningness in erasing the culture and the art of the subaltern from the historiography. This act proves the statement of Ranajit Guha “The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.” (Guha, 37)

There are lot of similarities between the Osu people of Igbo society and the Malas and Madigas of the Telugu society, they both are oppressed by the culture of their native land. Both are considered as untouchables both are treated like, slaves in their own land in the name of caste. During the colonial era both were in the dilemma to choose between the native religion and the colonizers religion. The native religion oppressed them in the name of their birth it ostracized them from the social activities. They never hold power in the system for centuries but the colonizers religion offers them equality and identity which acts as a catalyst for their conversion to the colonizers religion. Though these two communities are from different landscape and ethnic group the treatment they received from their native oppressors are same, their dilemma is same and the choice they made is same.

This research paper investigates the mass conversion of subaltern people into the colonizers religion. And tries to give reasons for their conversion and proposes their Dilemma as the primary reason for the conversion, that is, dilemma of choosing between the two oppressors the native oppressors or the colonial oppressors. In this dilemma, the particular sect of people who has been analysed in the paper chose the religion of the colonizers due to the rigidness and the brutal restriction in the native religion. They did not withhold the native religion which has nothing to offer them but oppression and restriction in every aspect and also neglects the culture of the subalterns. So the subalterns chose the colonizer's religion as a hybrid identity to represent themselves.

### **Work Cited:**

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin Random House. 2010.

Allport, Gordon W. *The Nature of Prejudice*. 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition, Addison-Wesley Publication Company; 1979,

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Guha, Ranajit. “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.” Selected subaltern Studies, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Oxford University Press, 1988.

Rao, Kalyana G. et al., *Untouchable Spring*. Hyderabad, Telangana, India, Orient Blackswan, 2018.